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ABSTRACT

An elementary school principal's successful attempts to improve her inner-city school are described in this case study, which includes a diagram representing her formula for better education. The principal, a charismatic, elderly woman, takes an aggressive role in improving the school environment and student nutrition, encouraging and monitoring the improvement of teachers' skills, increasing discipline, and communicating individually with students and teachers. Her tasks are made difficult by lack of parental support, crime, high transiency rate, and the economic disadvantages of her students. Most of her students are Black and Hispanic; for the Hispanics she helped write a grant that resulted in an examplary bilingual program. This principal emphasizes listening, taking into account the needs of the whole child, consistency in discipline, developing a staff with unified goals, team teaching, holding teachers accountable for the progress of their students, and developing independent thinking in the students. Her methods have been successful in raising performance scores and improving attitudes in the school and the community. (FWR)

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An Effective School: A Case Study

Presented by:

Candace Poindexter
California Educational Research Association
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An Introduction to the Setting

Worthington School is located eight miles southwest of downtown Los Angeles directly under the flight pattern for L.A. International Airport. The campus is comprised of a fifty year old, two-story main building, and 17 temporary classrooms. These rooms house 30 kindergarten through sixth grade classes, 2 reading labs, 1 math lab, a Resource Program for learning handicapped children, a Bilingual office and a federally funded Chapter I office. Although old, the school is freshly painted inside and out and there is an air of friendliness which immediately greets visitors. A sense of school pride is apparent as children quietly leave the morning all-school assembly to begin their daily lessons. Besides administrators, classroom teachers, specialists and coordinators, 23 instructional aides complete the faculty.

The 920 students who play on the small, cracked and pock-mark playground represent the multi-ethnicity of the community. 61% of the students are Black, 36% are Hispanic and the other 3% are made up of Vietnamese, Filipinos and Anglos. Of these children 76% score below the 50th percentile on a nationally normed test and are therefore eligible participants in the Chapter I compensatory education program.

The neighborhood surrounding the school consists primarily of small duplexes and single family rentals, most of which are fairly well maintained. Crime is no stranger to this neighborhood, and in an attempt to protect their belongings, an increasing number of families are installing protective fences and grilles on their windows.

Until 1979, the school was called Center Park School and had a negative reputation both socially and academically. Because of the inferior educational quality, a number of neighborhood families refused to send their children to the local school, but instead, scrimped to send them to private schools. In September of 1978, a new principal was assigned to the school who immediately set about changing the school's reputation. By the end of her first year she made major strides in accomplishing her objectives. She not only improved the physical appearance of the old structure, but she changed the name of the school to honor the current School Superintendent, Dr. Frances B. Worthington. By the end of the second year, the reputation had so improved that many of the families were once again sending their children to their neighborhood school.

The Principal

Worthington's principal, Georgia Klaras, has the distinction of being number one on the district's seniority list. She started in the district 40 years ago and has since served in a variety of capacities. She began her principalship at this school 5 years ago and brought with her a style, vitality and leadership ability which was previously lacking. Always extremely well-dressed, she exudes intelligence and energy. She seems to be omnipresent and has an uncanny way of showing up whenever there is a problem to be solved.

Mrs. Klaras' life is dedicated to education. To this end, she attends many meetings and conferences on her own time which help to keep her leadership current and vital. Everything she

attempts educationally is for the betterment of Worthington's children and not for her own self-aggrandizement.

She has very high expectations for her students, and is confident that they can succeed where others assume failure. She believes in administering to the "whole child" and is often found helping a student in her office and listening to their concerns. "I am a firm believer in helping a youngster explore his problem so that if the problem occurs again, it has a solution".

Having had experience as a Jr. High school counselor, she involves herself with much of the discipline even though she has a capable assistant principal and guidance counselor. Through this personal interaction and frequent classroom visits, she knows the names of a surprising number of the 920 students at Worthington School.

Instructional Management at Worthington School

Worthington School credits much of the success in their academic achievement to their efforts in team teaching for basic skills, a program instituted by Mrs. Klaras 3 years ago. A block of time is set aside every morning for school-wide reading to allow for a greater flexibility in the teaming process. Children are carefully placed in a group which corresponds to their instructional level. While teaming in reading is mandatory, grade levels have the option of deciding whether or not they will team for math, with about 50% of them choosing to do so. Mrs. Klaras is an active participant in the management of instruction and, although she delegates authority to other members of the staff, she is keenly aware of the needs and demands of the program.

A Principal's Support Team meets weekly to assess the school program and deal with any problems which might occur. The support team is comprised of the Assistant Principal, the school Counselor, the federal and state Projects Coordinator and the Bilingual Specialist. Additional support is received from 2 federally funded Reading Specialists, a federally funded Math Specialist, and classroom instructional aides.

Of the thirty classroom teachers at Worthington, 56% are under 35 years of age. Mrs. Klaras visits the classrooms as often is humanly possible, offering support while skillfully utilizing the techniques of Clinical Supervision.

Principal Characteristics. Before accepting her current assignment as principal, Mrs. Klaras served the district as a teacher, Assistant Principal, Principal and Counselor. It was her experience as a Jr. High school counselor however, which she feels best prepared her for this job.

She is a master at counseling and disciplining all students, including the unpredictable and physiologically changing sixth graders. She often models desirable counseling techniques for teachers and others responsible for discipline and insists that all who interact with children really listen to what the child has to say before judging.

Her experience and verbal skills are also apparent in her dealings with parents. Rarely does an irate parent leave her office in that condition. As she does with the children, she listens to what parents have to say before taking any action. Parents usually leave calmly, happy to accept the advice or

suggestions offered to them behind the closed door of the principal's office.

She is very supportive of her teachers and has discovered the right blend of praise and constructive criticism to motivate teachers to achieve to their full potential.

Influences from the Community Context. 44% of the families in the immediate area surrounding Worthington School receive some type of federal monetary assistance. 88% of the children receive free breakfasts and lunches. The school transciency rate hovers around the 70% mark. These statistics coupled with the increasing Hispanic enrollment in an otherwise Black population tend to create an unstable neighborhood environment. This is manifested in the increasing amount of violence and child abuse evidenced in the community. In a recent one month period, Mrs. Klaras had to contend with an attempted murder of a child by her mother, a rash of child abuse cases, a sixth grade boy who violently attacked another, as well as the usual school fights and confrontations. Throughout all of this, she is able to maintain a calm demeanor as well as a smooth running school and instructional program.

There is a definite lack of parent participation at Worthington School. While Mrs. Klaras generously participates in community affairs, that involvement is not reciprocal. P.T.A. and School Advisory meetings are very poorly attended. Happily for the hard-working students, however, parental interest is generally shown when students are involved in performances.

Influences from Institutional Context. More often than not Mrs. Klaras views the institutional context of the district office, as being restrictive to Worthington's program. She often seems to be thwarted by district personalities, policies and budgetary restraints in her quest for better educational opportunities. The continuing cutbacks in per pupil expenditures have made the "luxury" of federal funding almost a necessity for a quality education. Activities such as field trips and staff development, which at one time were provided through district budgets, are now exclusive products of compensatory education funds.

A recent Board of Education mandate to raise achievement test scores is an additional burden to the principal at Worthington School. Because of this Board stipulation, there has been an increasing amount of district-initiated standardization in curriculum implementation. These mandated activities are stifling to the creativity of Mrs. Klaras who had, several years previously, initiated a similar program of sequential skill development which was proving successful in student learning.

Klaras' Instructional Management Modes and Activities. When Mrs. Klaras arrived at Worthington five years ago, the school was physically run down and had a reputation which matched its appearance. The academic quality of learning was far below average. The new principal conceived of a plan to improve the achievement of the students and immediately prioritized her goals.

She concentrated first on the physical environment. Since her arrival coincided with the district's program to "soundproof" the school, she was able to persuade authorities to a few additional renovations. Walls were knocked down and larger facilities

were made available for office personnel and teachers workroom and lounge. The classrooms were painted bright colors and the drab hallways were transformed into showcases for children's artwork.

The first year she also initiated a Breakfast program at the school. Many of the parents were already at work when their children left for school and Mrs. Klaras recognized the need for beginning the day with a nutritionally sound meal. By ten o'clock, many were complaining of stomach aches brought on by emptiness and seemed to lack incentive to learn. Once the breakfast program was instituted, stomach pains were gone and students were more favorably inclined towards learning.

"Consistency and fairness are two important factors in a well-disciplined school". To this end, Mrs. Klaras implemented two more components of her long range plan. As teachers began to see that they were going to be held accountable for their students' learning, several sought transfers to other schools. Those teachers were replaced by staff members who were open to new ideas and who shared Mrs. Klaras' conviction that the children in this school could learn.

Next a school-wide Assertive Discipline plan was implemented to help achieve the consistency the Principal wanted. Very positive results were quickly noticeable from these two strategies.

Once the school climate was improved, Mrs. Klaras concentrated on the instructional management of the school. Team teaching was implemented with careful attention paid to the diagnosis of the students' strengths and weaknesses in the basic skill areas. Staff

members were sent to visit a variety of exemplory schools including UCLA's University Elementary School. County and private consultants were invited to the school to help the teachers familiarize themselves with successful techniques and procedures, such as individualized instruction.

By the fourth year, the staff was ready to accept and implement additional new ideas. Teams were revamped to provide for stronger teaching and the structure of the reading specialists' program was changed to provide better service to teachers and students. In addition, almost half of the staff attended a five day Madeline Hunter workshop entitled "Increasing Teaching Effectiveness". Teachers were tremendously motivated and immediately began implementing some of the ideas they gained. These teachers along with several other interested staff members attended six early Friday morning lectures to hear presentations by a U.E.S. consultant in the areas of motivation, reinforcement theory, Bloom's taxonomy, and teaching towards independent thinking. The teaching of these participants was then observed and critiqued by the consultant.

The next year, critical thinking skills became the topic to be pursued. Twenty-one teachers volunteered to attend five 4 hour workshops after school to learn how to integrate the teaching of critical thinking skills into all of the curricular areas.

In addition to all this, Mrs. Klaras recognized an urgent need for providing a quality education for the increasing number of Hispanic students. A proponent of Bilingual Education as it was originally intended, Mrs. Klaras helped write a Title VII grant which was subsequently funded. Summer plans were set

aside for three years to recruit truly bilingual teachers who supported the type of program being implemented at the school. As a result of her unrelenting efforts, the bilingual program at Worthington School has been recognized by the state as being exemplary.

This comprehensive five year plan conceived by Mrs. Klaras has resulted in increased proficiency in the teaching of basic skills which in turn has resulted in a dramatic improvement in student achievement.

Expected Climate Outcomes. In the process of accomplishing her long range goals, Mrs. Klaras has been a positive influence on the school climate. Her desire was to provide a learning environment for staff and students which would enable them to function at their optimum. Both the rise in achievement test scores and the increased level of sophistication in classroom teaching skill, attest to the fact that she has accomplished her goal. Teachers at Worthington are now aware of the importance of being effective in both the cognitive and affective domains, a factor Mrs. Klaras feels in critical to a well rounded education.

Influence on Instructional Organization. Mrs. Klaras' influence on the instructional organization is profound. She is truly the instructional leader of the school. Always looking to improve the status quo, she frequently changes teaching assignments to strengthen various grade levels. While there may be some initial discontent, by the end of the year, teachers thank her for opening new doors to them.

She carefully monitors the reading progress of all students and insists on direct instruction as the best utilization of the limited teaching time. She expects quality teaching, but is careful to provide teachers with staff development for any new techniques or skills expected of them. Once learned, teachers are held accountable for implementation of these ideas. Frequent monitoring of classrooms and lesson plan books are common methods to ensure the expected high standards.

Mrs. Klaras has turned faculty meetings, which typically are solely informational, into vehicles to promote better quality instruction. Time is set aside for teams to meet individually and discuss a central theme or issue, and then share their ideas with the rest of the staff. Many innovative ideas have been gained from this type of interaction.

Expected Student Outcomes. Mrs. Klaras' ultimate goal for students is to help them become independent thinkers. She feels that schools have an obligation to teach the use of good judgement in all decisions students might make regarding their behavior. "This, to me, creates a stability that provides the incentive needed for instructional development". Her high expectations for students are rooted in her belief that all children can learn and are entitled to a quality education. Figure 1 summarizes Mrs. Klaras' model of instructional management at Worthington School.

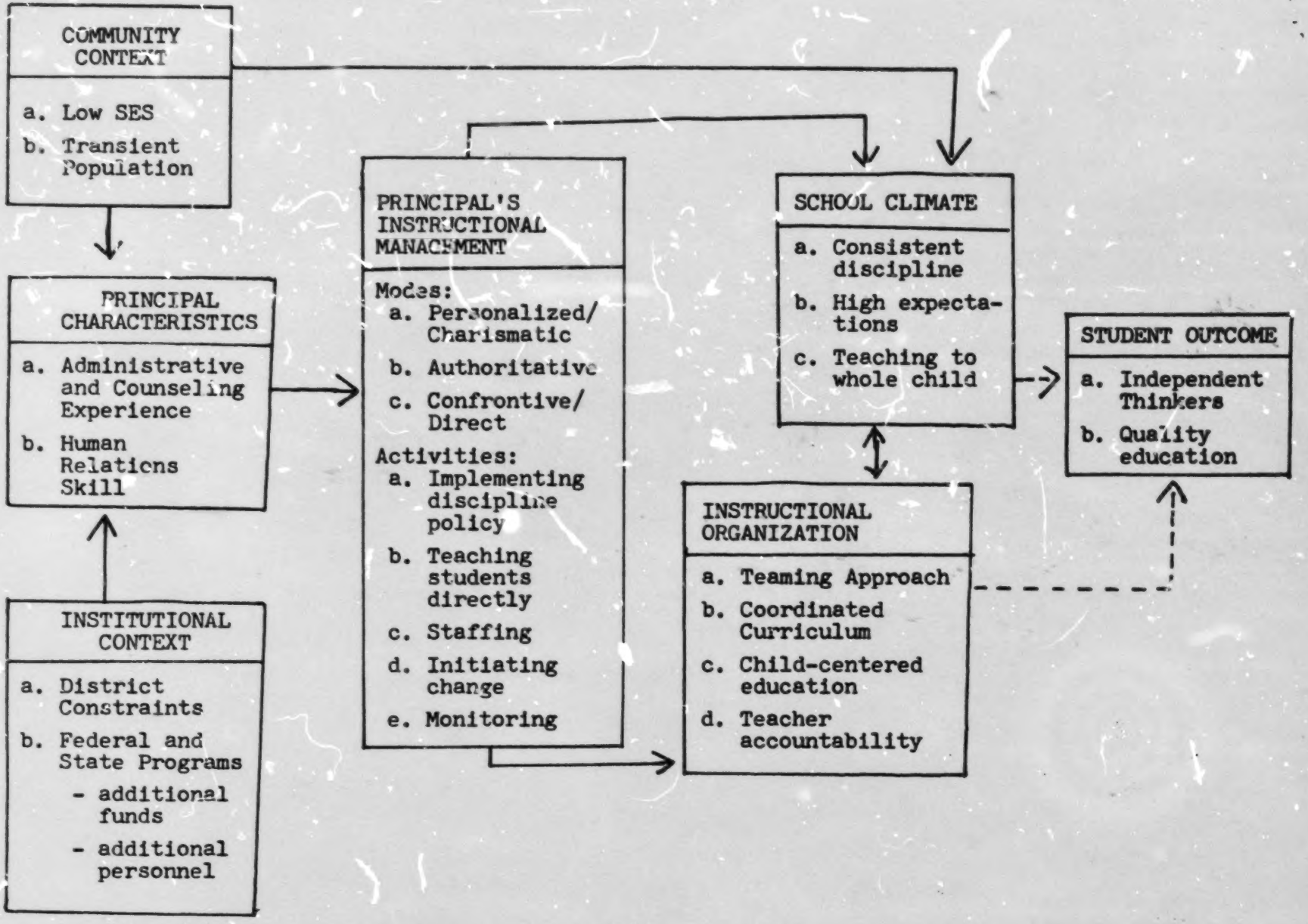

Figure 1: Instructional Management Model - Georgia Klaras, Worthington School